

Fellow Huskies:

This weekend, many students will be moving back into our residence halls and Monday is the first day of spring semester classes, which are all online for the first two weeks of the residential quarantine. We look forward to the start of the semester and to welcoming our students and faculty back to our campuses.

We do so yet again under extraordinary circumstances, beginning with the resurgent pandemic that continues to menace the world.

But we are preparing for a pandemic-free future as well. This semester we will convene discussions imagining the future of work at UConn and another on the future of learning, with the aspirational goal of making UConn the best place to work and learn in Connecticut and to leverage what we have learned from the past year.

But as the semester begins, we are acutely aware that it is not the pandemic alone that makes this such an unusual and challenging moment in time. Our nation is wracked by extreme division. Only days ago the U.S. Capitol Building was violently attacked and overwhelmed, resulting in five deaths amid violence, chaos and lawlessness that threatens to repeat itself in the days ahead, and the tensile strength of our democracy itself is being tested.

If you are eager for the day when we can talk about this period in the past tense, you are not alone.

But one thing we must never lose sight of is hope. Not baseless wishful thinking, but the knowledge that things *will* change for the better, because we will collectively *make* that change. We have ample evidence that while the human race has demonstrated great capacity for self-destruction, it has greater capacity to overcome the most daunting challenges.

Our response to the pandemic is an encouraging example. Vaccines generally take years to develop. But thanks to science, determination and extraordinary human ingenuity, COVID vaccines were developed, tested, approved and manufactured and are now being distributed and administered throughout the world – all only 12 months after the very first COVID case was discovered. We can see this as the beginning of the end for this deadly virus. There is still such a long wait, and we are all weary if not exhausted by the need to not let our guard down, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

No historical comparison is perfect. But we can look to numerous examples throughout history when great progress came out of the most trying times. Going back to 1862, even while our nation was at war with itself, Congress passed and President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act establishing the foundation for land grant universities, including our own, laying the groundwork for what would become the greatest system of higher education in the world.

Let us think of what seeds we may plant now whose legacies may be as great -- perhaps an end to structural racism, the protection of the planet, and the restoration of mutual understanding and human connections across impossible divisions.

I believe we will look back on 2021 as the end of a long night before a new dawn. One in which we surmount the obstacles we face, apply the lessons learned from the painful experiences we have endured, and pivot toward progress, embracing a new beginning and leaving the past behind.

I wish you well on the start of your spring semester, and I look forward to seeing all of you in the weeks ahead.

Tom